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ABSTRACT

Four teachers at Fort Lewis College, Colorado, use humor to send messages which "leap frog" resistance to the new and different, and go directly to the preconscious. The power in these humorous conceptual leaps is that the entering information sticks to the anger and passions of the human psyche, thus fostering retention. Linda Mack, a music teacher and director of numerous choral ensembles, feels humor is important to keep the attention of her students, and to create good frames of mind. Reg Graham, a retiring marketing professor, uses humor to help students learn. Janet Jones, a new psychology professor, incorporates humor in an impromptu, spontaneous lecture manner. For history professor Duane Smith, humor enters his lectures as it comes and when it comes. For these professors, humor helps students learn. (RS)

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They're a Hard Act to Follow: Four Professors Who Make Them Laugh in Liberal Arts

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Acknowledgements

Humor in teaching seems quite sneaky. All Winter Term this paper sat in our minds with little to show on paper. Teaching was too big a sacrifice. In the "eleventh hour," both figuratively and literally, students came together over pizza to all collaborate and compose. These students came from a class in Management and Organizational Behavior and from two Sophomore Composition classes. Had these students not pulled together during the term, no one would have thought of such an approach at 5:00AM, less than thirty-six hours before presenting the paper.

Tolstoy (Bartholomae, 1983) tells of a composition seminar with a similar twist. He could not find a method that, to him, truly encouraged students to delve into the art and life of writing. During one class, however, he started writing as his students were writing:

> The sight of the teacher writing caused a flurry in the classroom. One student said, "Write, write or I'll give it to you!" Others crowded around his chair and read over his shoulder. The commotion was such that Tolstoy stopped and read his first page to them. They did not like it. Nobody praised it. In defense of himself, Tolstoy began to explain the "plan" of what was to follow. they butted in, "No, no that won't do," he made corrections and they began helping him out (p. 305).

His students became so engrossed in correcting Tolstoy's paragraph that two students stayed past midnight.

Two students also stayed late into the night to write their portion of this paper. Not only do these students deserve recognition, but so do all of their classmates. Everyone, the teacher, the late-night collaborators, and every other student contributed to a class atmosphere open to writing into the night.

These classroom collaborators deserve recognition by name. First, the individuals directly participating/co-authoring in the pizza and after-hours writing bunch were: Aimee Black, Randy Bourgeois, Jeff Butler, Cole Dean, Aime Hoffman, Bob Houck, Rob Johnson, Todd Loschen, Tonja Petticrew, Jim Reed, Julie Ross, Teri Sheakley, Jay Stenhaug, Kristi Stewart, Sara Stuessie, Keith Swain and Jay Szabo.

Other students in the classes indirectly contributed through their sincere concern and support for their classmates, the teacher, and the subjects studied. These students also deserve mention by name:

> In Management and Organizational Behavior, Michelle Brossard, Jeff Butler, Misty Etcitty, Gary Fitch, Sheryl Griffin, Rich Griswold, Tyler Harris, Sean Huggins, Sean Kinsey, George Merriman, Ethan Titus, Marty Wadsworth and B. J. Wiggins.
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> In the daytime Sophomore Composition Seminar, Wayne Anderson, Jill Calpin, Greg Church, Christine Colgan, Erin Eddy, Troy Johns, Robyn Lewis, Matt Nelson, Jack Pestello, Laura Rains, Jon Rife, Eric Thompson, Steve Trembly, Brett Walton, Tonia Wilmot and Lanette Wright.
>
> In the nighttime Sophomore Composition Seminar, Dawnde Berndt, Meg Ernest, Scot Geisler, Mark Goldin, Kelly Holloway, Carmela Huerta, Dan Kirk, Cris Koetting, Greg Livingston, Marc Mitchell, Billy Stanford, Sally Tinker, Ken Tolle and Don Whitlock.

Everyone had a lot of anger, power, laughs and learning. Learning for all was reciprocal, everyone knew himself or herself better for the experience (Follett, 1928).

The authors also wish to thank the Audio Visual Department at Fort Lewis College for their patience and skill in creating

multiple copies of the original interviews. This technical support enabled students to work in teams on each separate interview.

ABSTRACT

Teaching, which is fun and laughter, impacts both student and professor at a preconscious level. Preconscious impact, for the purposes of this paper and in the psychoanalytic tradition, equals retention. Professors care enough to laugh along with their students. The paper describes each of the four professors at Fort Lewis College and their uses for humor. Each describes himself or herself in taped interviews. What results are four entirely unique ways of bypassing the conscious so that communication "sticks." Humor and jokes are the glue for these teacher/performers, who all are hard acts to follow. For other teachers, having a class after one of their classes is not a "laughing matter."

INTRODUCTION

Humor is quite individualized, and the classroom is no exception. The moment, one's memory, audience response--all play on the timing, the statement, the guffaw. Each professorial technique described herein plays the student audience differently to heighten knowledge of music, marketing, psychology or history. But all have one thing in common, "they make them laugh." Thus, these comedians of the classroom stage send messages which "leap frog" resistance to the new and different, and go directly to the preconscious (Freud, 1900). The power in these humorous conceptual leaps is that the entering information sticks to the angers and passions of the human psyche.

Since no certain pattern fits this comedic art form, the professors are presented in the order interviewed. Linda Mack teaches music, and directs numerous choral ensembles. Music to her is not a laughing matter, yet she plays humor like a finely tuned instrument. Reg Graham will retire next year from the School of Business, but leaves behind a kindly support for students and faculty. He laces marketing with humor, regard and caring.
Janet Jones is new to the psychology faculty. Her serious side hides a kidding, loving character. She only remembers wanting to teach. She got her wish, and a sharp whit to boot. Duane Smith teaches history or does he? Duane's classes are classic walks through humor and history. For Duane, humor is a laughing matter, but he powers home lesson after lesson with mere twinkles in his eyes.

LINDA MACK, The Unique Music Professor

Student Opinion

Linda Mack places great emphasis on the concept of humor in the classroom (Mack, 1990). She feels humor is important to keep the attention of her students, thus enabling her to be a better teacher. A good frame of mind is extremely important from this standpoint. If the student feels better, he/she learns more. That is the assumption. Amusement within the class helps create a memorable experience for both the student and teacher. Simply, creative activities, particularly humorous ones, impart memories.

Classroom Activities

Entertainment, then, keeps students involved in the lessons. Although most humorous events are spontaneous, some are planned. Linda uses many approaches to add spice to her teaching. For example, instead of telling her choir to sing high and low notes, she asks them to make puppy and kitten voices. Another attention getter is telling students a funny story about herself.

She feels that a lot of entertainment ensues spontaneously. When funny events unfold, she jokes about them and continues her lecture. Linda believes that a classroom should not be full of tension and boredom. As a result, she keeps her students entertained, while helping them to retain course material.

Individual Personality

Humor fits Linda Mack's personality. She does not put up fronts to her students; students in return let down their guard. Because she is a choral performer at heart, she seems to sing out lessons using humor for harmony.

As with the other professors interviewed, they find it easy to plan a lesson, but not humor. A comedy routine does not fit the classroom, but repetition of jokes about hilarious moments in history fit Linda Mack's classes. Her personality and musical ear for humor combine to produce many laughs. She enjoys the lighter moments in class, and indulges herself by laughing at herself.

Exercises

Creativity and humor seem to make good companions. Creativity is the key to Linda's fun exercises. Fun holds student attention. For example, as a breathing exercise, Linda instructs her students to blow out Ronald Reagan's birthday candles. This activity provides amusement.

When do students sing the best? Well, according to Linda Mack, they sing best when completely relaxed. Not surprising, then, at the beginning of every class students give each other back rubs. Students say back rubs stimulate conversation, as well. For this unique teacher/director humor serves to entertain and teach, all at the same time.

Learning as Justification

Humor and learning do seem to mix (Koller, 1988-1989). Reg Graham approaches this mix in the classroom with a unique perspective. When asked about his thoughts on humor, he replied, "If it gets to the pointy of helping the students learn, it is a good idea. However, if your focus becomes to entertain and not to teach, then humor is abused" (Graham, 1990).

To Reg, learning is the classroom objective. Humor provides a learning tool if placed in the hands of a competent instructor. But teaching mainly to entertain borders on an abuse of professorial privileges.

Forms of Humor

As far as various humorous techniques go, Reg commented, "When I'm getting ready for a class, I will plan on putting up certain overhead transparencies with a little humor in them." Humor overhead focuses the class' attention on the course material. According to Dr. Graham, "If humor can be worked in, that's fine. I just have never made it a point to spend time trying to work with it."

His use of humor in classes is spontaneous, flowing as the lecture flows. Keeping with his philosophy of content first, he does not deliberately bend his marketing lectures to fit the humor.

Humor Outside the Classroom

Reg Graham's humor also is visible outside the classroom. Last year, as an example, he put a picture of a toilet and a magazine rack on his door. The picture provided a humorous analogy to a computer: Sitting and reading the magazine on the toilet input, using toilet paper and flushing the toilet the output. Rather graphic extension of the old phrase "garbage in, garbage out."

As one might suspect from this picture on his door, Reg has a lighter side. His walk and pace, his smile greet students as he meets them in the halls. He says hello to almost anyone he sees. Yes, Reg Graham is a happy man, naturally inclined to joke and laugh in or out of class.

JANET JONES, The New Psychology Professor

Spontaneity by Design

Janet Jones, on the other hand, believes she could use more humor in her classes. In teaching psychology, she does not deliberately implant humor. Humor for Janet must be done in an impromptu, spontaneous, go-with-the-flow lecture manner. "Trying to do humor in advance usually is a flop" (Jones, 1990).

By design, so to speak, humor comes naturally for her, or it just does not work. Furthermore, Jones believes that "humor is a tricky thing to use in teaching because it sometimes backfires."

Serious about Humor

Janet seems to take humor quite seriously. In fact, her serious side hides a humorous vein. The joke is not her chosen field, psychology. Comedy comes to Janet quite naturally, an off-the-cuff quip and quick smile.

DUANE SMITH, The Legendary History Professor

Practical Jokes in Lectures

For Duane Smith, humor enters his lectures as it comes and when it comes. "In 1776 (?) a Gallop Poll found only five percent of Americans knew of George Washington, but ninety percent knew of King George III." Or "Ray Crock, the founder of McDonalds, stated that all managers must have a degree in Hamburgerology and a minor in Fries." Those are just two of the many Smithisms which a few students unwittingly write into their lecture notes and study for exams. Knowing this, students must wonder what Smithisms faculty have swallowed over the years.

No Sting Operation Here

One might think Duane sets up faculty and students for these humorous falls, through isms and punch lines. Hardly. According to Dr. Smith, the moments, the mood and the message collectively trigger his jokes and isms. Not infrequently, he often makes himself the brunt of a joke, laughing all the more heartily. "A teacher can't take himself all that seriously," he says (Smith, 1990).

Duane does not plan and plant his humor. It is impromptu. A give and take with "the student and the topics of discussion" often triggers his jokes. His idea of humor is that it does not have to be a "belly laugh" either. Humor to him extends to something remembered and laughed about long after, and far away from class. History and humor, together, are easy to learn.

CONCLUSION

Music, marketing, psychology and history have much in common. From the standpoint of comedy, these disciplines share a humorous side, known for retention as well as fun. Professors who joke about learning, consciously or unconsciously realize that a laughing student is a learning student. Moreover, humor directs communication over the normal resistance to unsettling insights, directly to the vast reaches of the mind.

For Linda Mack, Reg Graham, Janet Jones and Duane Smith, humor injects their teaching with unbridled student retention. These professors empower their students by scattering fact upon insight deep within the unconscious. Such power brings responsibility. Taken too seriously, these teaching comedians might even scare themselves.

Borrowing from Bob Hope's closing as a final tribute to Freud and the power of classroom humor, thanks Sigmund, "Thanks for the Memories."

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